

Before CND

Peggy Duff and Ken Blackwell

In February 1971, shortly before the publication of her book, Left, Left, Left, Peggy Duff was interviewed by Ken Blackwell, Archivist of Bertrand Russell's papers at McMaster University in Canada. McMaster acquired Russell's Archives in 1968. Ken Blackwell catalogued the papers in Britain, including at Russell's home in North Wales, prior to their dispatch to Canada, which has become the global centre for Russell studies. This excerpt is from the opening part of the interview. Explanatory notes have been added in square brackets. Details of Spokesman's new edition of Left, Left, Left are at the end.

◀ *Russell with Peggy Duff*

KB: This is Ken Blackwell interviewing Mrs Peggy Duff, who has been with the British CND [Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament] movement for its entire history and who is now lecturing in North America, touring the campuses, finding out what's going on in the American peace movement. Peggy, you're looking at a book called *Mud Pie: The CND Story* by Herb Greer. What do you think of that book as a history of the CND movement?

PD: It is very hostile and in some cases, so far as I remember, inaccurate.

KB: Has there been a decent history of the CND movement?

PD: Well, the best one is Christopher Driver's.

KB: Yes, we have that one. *The Disarmers*.

PD: That's the best one so far I think. Canon Collins wrote about it a bit in a book called *Faith Under Fire – or Fire Under Faith*, I forget which one. Of course, there's my own that's coming out this summer.

KB: Which is called?

PD: *Left, Left, Left*.

KB: And that's to be a history of your involvement in politics?

PD: In a number of campaigns, of which CND is one.

KB: In front of me I have the earliest file of [Bertrand] Russell's, from Russell's

involvement with campaigns for nuclear disarmament.

PD: 1955.

KB: Yes, 1955. There are several letters to do with his talk at the end of 1954, called 'Man's Peril from the Hydrogen Bomb'. That started things going for him. He got Einstein to join with him in a big statement in July 1955, there's a scientists conference in August 1955 and a book was published later on that year called *The Bomb: Challenge and Answer* [published] by McAllister.

PD: Of course, that was the period when Britain was agreeing to go ahead with the H-Bomb in the House [of Commons]. Aneurin Bevan opposed it, not because he was totally against nuclear weapons but he was against the first use. Massive Retaliation, in fact.

KB: He was for Massive Retaliation?

PD: No, he was against Massive Retaliation. He believed in a second-strike force: you had to have them as a deterrent. I think he was wrong, but that was his position. But he almost got expelled from the Labour Party because he refused to vote for the party resolution on the H-Bomb. That was '54-'55 and that was when Britain went ahead with building the H-Bomb. Previously, they'd been building the Atom Bomb.

KB: In 1956, not much seems to have happened with Russell except that he was busily organising the first Pugwash Conference in '57.

PD: There was a campaign in Britain called 'The H-Bomb Petition' that was run by Anthony Greenwood, Anthony Wedgwood Benn [Tony Benn], Julius Silverman. It was very inefficiently run by a man named Arthur Carr and it organised a petition and held an Albert Hall meeting which was not very successful. They had about 500 people in the Albert Hall, which looked very bad. But it's interesting that some of the people involved like Tony Wedgwood Benn later were supporting the Labour government keeping of Polaris [missiles] etc. I don't think Russell was involved in that [petition].

KB: No, I don't see any letters from him on that.

PD: After that, apart from Pugwash, there was really nothing until the National Council for the Abolition of Nuclear Weapon Tests started, which

grew out of a group in Hampstead.

KB: Did Suez have anything to do with it, or Hungary – both happening in '56.

PD: I think it's possible that people switched interest from the bomb for a period and then the whole thing zoomed up again in '57 partly because of the tests at Christmas Island which, because they were British tests, caused a lot of excitement; partly because there had been a big campaign inside the Labour Party and it was expected that the 1957 conference of the Labour Party might pass a resolution for the unilateral renunciation [of nuclear weapons]. They failed to do it, partly because Aneurin Bevan opposed it. That was the famous split between Aneurin and the Left. That was one of the roots, because it was after the Labour Party failed to pass this resolution that Russell and Priestley and these people started to get together to start some organised resistance. Until then they thought that the Labour Party was going to do it.

KB: In late '57 Russell wrote an open letter to Khrushchev and Eisenhower. Khrushchev replied and [US Secretary of State] Dulles replied. Khrushchev replied again. At this time [former US Ambassador to the Soviet Union, George F.] Kennan had given the Reith Lectures [on 'Russia, the Atom and the West'] and then CND was formed. How did ...

PD: Well, it all came from different routes. There was the failure, in early October, of the Labour Party to pass this resolution and particularly the defection of Aneurin Bevan. It was the first time that the Left and Aneurin had split. The tests at Christmas Island went on through all the summer of '57 and the National Council for the Abolition of Nuclear Weapon Tests was the only organisation at that time which was providing any sort of organised resistance. There were a few local committees which set out on their own in places like Oxford and Reading which were operating without any national presence. And then there were the Russell letters to Khrushchev and Eisenhower, and the replies. And Kingsley Martin [editor of *New Statesman* magazine, got involved]. There was a lot of correspondence after that, articles by J.B. Priestley in the *New Statesman*, there were the Reith Lectures by Kennan and, as a result of that, there were two separate things that came together: the National Council decided that it should enlarge its aims to include campaigns against the weapons, not just the tests and at the same time there was this meeting in Kingsley Martin's flat in the Adelphi

between Kennan, Russell, Priestley, [Nobel Prize winning physicist Patrick] Blackett and [Stephen] King-Hall, I think, at which it was agreed that some of them – like Blackett – would operate within the Establishment and that a public campaign should be mounted. The two go together. The initiative from Russell, Priestley and Kingsley was to organise a public campaign. I got in touch with them and the thing was merged.

KB: Do you think that Russell ever operated within the Establishment at that time?

PD: Not in the same way that Blackett did.

KB: Was Blackett successful at all?

PD: I think that to a certain extent they succeeded in creating some doubts and some alarm. I think that it's notable that later, by something like 1960, we had at least one General who was publicly opposing nuclear weapons.

KB: Have you read that interesting book by C.P. Snow, *The Corridors of Power*? He talks about an effort to get nuclear disarmament from within the Establishment.

PD: Yes.

KB: In front of me I have what I suppose is your first letter to Russell, 9th September 1957. Do you remember writing it?

PD: Yes, vaguely. That was an appeal for funds.

KB: This is before CND got started.

PD: It was before the Labour Party conference. It wasn't the first time I'd met him. He'd been involved in an earlier campaign I'd organised between 1945 and '49 called 'Save Europe Now', which was concerned with political campaigns against starvation in Europe but in particular for relief of both ex-allies and ex-enemies.

KB: Was that an all-party campaign?

PD: It was a Victor Gollancz campaign.

KB: What part did Russell have in it?

PD: He was one of the sponsors and he used to come to meetings.

KB: Did he speak for the movement?

PD: Yes. We held some public meetings. We raised a lot of money. We got bread rationed in order that there should be more bread for Europe. It was typical of a Gollancz campaign because Gollancz always did things you would never expect him to do. He was Jewish and he organised a campaign for help to Germany after the war. He did the same thing later for Arabs. We organised a campaign in '47 for repatriation of prisoners of war, who were still in Britain and should have been sent home. That was successful. We had a big meeting at Albert Hall, right at the beginning – it must have been about the end of '45 – and I think Russell spoke at that.

KB: Did you meet Russell in those days?

PD: Yes, I met him at meetings. He came to one meeting and I can remember him saying that if it wasn't for the Atom Bomb – because in those days there were just Atom Bombs – in the hands of the United States, that the Russians might be at the Channel Ports within a few weeks. He was very anti-Soviet at that stage.

KB: Yes. In Volume Two of his *Autobiography* he retracts that, he says he was misled.

PD: I think he was misled. He had the courage to admit it.

KB: Did you know Russell on a personal basis?

PD: A bit, yes. A bit.

KB: What was he like? Did he have all his faculties?

PD: He was very much on the ball. He would come to the meetings and, unlike a lot of people, he never said anything unless he had something to say. He was always brief and very incisive. He was always like that, you wrote him a letter and you got a brief reply which gave you everything you wanted.

KB: How was he as a ‘committee man’, both in those days and later on, in the Campaign.

PD: In the Campaign, he very rarely came to committees. I think this was a mistake. He was presumed to be a ‘President’ – sort of a ‘House of Lords’ – and the Executive would meet and he was very rarely invited and very rarely came. He was invited to speak at meetings. He did a lot about the European conference that we tried to hold in the summer of ’58 but which was banned in Basel [Switzerland]. He spoke at the subsequent conference held in London the following January 1959. He did one or two things, like when we were banned in Basel he wrote the Swiss Confederation a very rude letter.

KB: What did he say?

PD: He said that it was not surprising that a country that even now refused the vote to women would ban a conference on nuclear weapons. He did everything he was asked. I think one of the tragedies of the subsequent split between the Committee [of 100] and CND was that he would really have been willing to do far more, but wasn’t asked to.

KB: That is a pity. I’m just looking through all these folders with Russell’s correspondence with you and other people in the Peace Movement. Here’s a letter from you saying: ‘Dear Lord Russell, Many thanks for speaking at our meeting on Monday’. What meeting do you think that was?

PD: I think it must have been at Central Hall.

KB: ‘Most people seem to think it was an historic occasion’, you wrote. ‘Secondly, I’ve had a request for an article on nuclear disarmament from the Yearbook of Leeds Trades Council’. Do you remember that book at all? What we’re trying to do in these archives is to trace down everything that Russell wrote, and we don’t have this book.

PD: The Leeds Trades Council – they should have it.

KB: So I could write to them, then?

PD: Yes.

KB: Oh, I see, and a synopsis of his speech at the Central Hall meeting was used.

PD: Do you have that?

KB: We have that speech and it's just been re-printed in a book called *The Rhetoric of the British Peace Movement*, with some comments which aren't so good. Oh yes, here's another letter from you asking Russell if you can print his speech as a leaflet.

PD: Yes, presumably we did.

KB: The archives don't have that leaflet.

PD: I'll see if we've got it, but I'm not sure.

KB: Here's a letter from the Aldermaston March Committee.

PD: That was the first one. It was a separate *ad-hoc* committee.

KB: And that handled the first Aldermaston March?

PD: Yes.

KB: Which became part of the CND movement after?

PD: Afterwards, CND organised them ...